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Contacts:
Ken Bacon and Megan Fowler

Sudan: Despite the Darfur Peace Agreement, Death and Displacement in South Darfur

“What was written in the Darfur Peace Agreement is just paperwork,” says a local leader of the Masalit tribe in Gereida in South Darfur. “After the signing, attacks have increased.”

Officials in Gereida, one of Darfur’s largest concentrations of displaced people, report almost nightly attacks in the area by mounted forces known as the Janjaweed, a government-supported Arab militia.

The population of 128,000 displaced people dwarfs Gereida’s normal population of 30,000 and is straining the limited humanitarian infrastructure in the area. Without increased security—which only the government of Sudan can assure now—and augmented humanitarian services, death rates could soar during the approaching rainy season. There is an urgent need for plastic sheeting, food deliveries and better coordination of the humanitarian response.

The Darfur Peace Agreement, which was signed on May 5, has actually made security worse in the area because virtually no one remains to protect the people from further attacks and looting. Only one of the three major rebel groups involved in Darfur’s 40-month civil war signed the DPA with the government of Sudan. That group, the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) faction headed by Minni Minawi (who is scheduled to meet with President Bush on July 25th as a reward for signing the peace agreement) controlled the Gereida area. The SLA faction announced that it would honor the ceasefire imposed by the DPA and moved its major fighting force north, where Minawi is fighting for control of his own tribe. By ending offensive operations that used to keep the Janjaweed at bay, the army

has left security to a feckless local SLA force that lacks training, equipment, ammunition and leadership. Many of the fighters are children armed with clubs.

By contrast, the government of Sudan has done nothing to disarm the Janjaweed, the mounted Arab militia that has operated in league with the government to push largely African tribes (such as the Masalit) from its villages and farms. The last group of 1,100 people arrived in late May, following a Janjaweed attack on their village 26 kilometers away. Now the Janjaweed are launching nightly attacks along the periphery of the sprawling camp, stealing animals and killing people who get in the way. As a result the camp is beginning to fall in on itself, with people fleeing the edges of the camp closer to the center. This will increase crowding in the camp and place people farther from the areas they must go to feed the animals they still have and gather firewood.

African Union troops in Gereida rarely patrol in the late afternoon-early evening hours when most of the attacks take place. The local AU commander says the limited mandate of the force—it is supposed to report on cease fire violations—prevents the type of aggressive patrolling that could provide a deterrent.

“There is no safety,” says a sheikh who led 600 people to the camp in February. “We heard that the UN was coming to save us from the war, but we haven’t seen anything yet,”

the sheikh says. In fact, the UN does want to replace the beleaguered AU force, but the Khartoum government is resisting. Even if the UN does come in, there will be no security until the government reigns in and disarms the Janjaweed, as it is required to do under the DPA. So far, there is no sign that the government is serious about disarming the Janjaweed or carrying out the agreement. Some tribal leaders doubt that the Khartoum government has the will or the power to disarm the Janjaweed, who have seized large amounts of territory and thousands of cows, camels and other animals for their nomadic flocks. In April, government and Janjaweed forces attacked a number of villages around Gereida, including Dito and Joghana, driving as many as 50,000 people into the Gereida area. These attacks are what caused the displaced population to surge to 128,000, according to a recent count.

There are only about half a dozen humanitarian agencies working in Gereida, and at various times the insecurity between the town and Nyala, the capital of south Darfur 90 kilometers to the north, has made the delivery of humanitarian supplies difficult. Two months ago the Khartoum government limited fuel deliveries to Gereida, further complicating the humanitarian response.

Many new arrivals lack plastic sheeting to protect their huts from the impending rains, although Oxfam says it is about to get 5,000 sheets. In addition, many families complain that they have not received food distributions, apparently due to a change in responsibility for food from the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) to the World Food Program. The WFP, which recently received a large food contribution from the U.S., is supposed to start food deliveries next month, but the rains could make delivery difficult for the next few months. Camp residents do seem to have adequate water, and sanitation facilities are improving.

The ICRC and ARC International run health clinics, and Merlin is about to open one. In addition, ARC and the Norwegian Refugee Council are considering taking over coordination of humanitarian activities, a move that would improve services.

Yet while the humanitarian response improves, the displaced people in Gereida sit and wait until it is safe enough to return home. This won't happen until they know they can live in their villages and farm their land without fear of further attacks.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ The promoters of the Darfur Peace Agreement, including the U.S., the AU, and the European Union, increase diplomatic and economic pressure on the government of Sudan to disarm the Janjaweed, as required in the DPA. Since the agreement was signed, powers have been slow to pressure Sudan.
- ❑ UN Security Council members, including China, Sudan's largest trading partner, and African leaders increase pressure on Sudan to accept a larger UN force with a strong mandate to protect civilians to replace the AU force at the end of the year. In the meantime, donors must continue supporting the AU force. The pressure started today at a meeting in Brussels.
- ❑ The UN Mission in Sudan move quickly to select and fund an agency to be the relief coordinator in Gereida.
- ❑ The UN and international agencies move quickly to meet the immediate needs for plastic sheeting and food.

RI president Ken Bacon and communications manager Megan Fowler are currently in Darfur.